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ONLINE DATABASES

Remaining Relevant Online

By Carol Tenopir

FOR THE ANNUAL DATABASE Marketplace survey (*LJ* 5/15/07, p. 34–48), we ask vendors what major trends will most affect the future of online products and services. Worries about declining library budgets topped the list in 2002 and 2004. Budgets are still up there, but even bigger issues dominate this year.

Beyond competition

Google Scholar, Microsoft Live Academic, and high-profile free sources such as Wikipedia pose worrisome competition for information companies and libraries. According to an Xrefer spokesperson, a particular concern is “how many researchers use [search engines] as their first step in any inquiry?” This means “many researchers limit their citation sources to those that are readily available through the open web. Using only free resources as sources of citations may lead to a distortion in scholarly communication.”

Often users select easily available sources or versions over better or more authoritative ones. This becomes particularly vexing if users don’t know when to question the quality of web material or what the library provides. Just as librarians see their instructional role as key, so, too, do publishers and vendors (see “Quality Still Matters,” *LJ* 5/1/07, p. 26). “Getting students to understand and use authoritative resources, not just Google, will continue to be a challenge,” said an ebrary representative.

And, as the Emerald Group respondent put it, “Information literacy continues to grow in importance—this will have a major effect on the use of online information in libraries—with publishers working with libraries to provide help in the education of library users as much as possible.”

Instruction and marketing of library resources go hand in hand. Several survey respondents echoed the need for libraries and publishers to work together, as artic-

ulated by the Facts On File spokesperson: “If these products are not used, librarians cannot justify paying for them when they come up for renewal, so both the library and the publisher/vendor must work together to increase their visibility.”

Of course, instruction and marketing ultimately involve budgets. Library funders and users must be convinced that high-quality information is worth paying for.

Essential tools

Even longtime database publishers, including H.W. Wilson, say they “must continue to work at communicating the value of our authoritative content vs.

management systems or web search engines.” Dow Jones’s Factiva® tries to achieve this goal by “integration into organizational intranets and portals with a common taxonomy and platform.”

Survey respondents say users are demanding tools that integrate external information with the research process for patrons or which help libraries demonstrate the value of fee-based sources. According to Thomson Scientific, “The U.S. academic library system continues to confront pressures to create and promote a culture for innovation.”

In the public sector, an InfoUSA respondent observed, “More public libraries will be offering business development

Tools that help library users do their work are in demand

Google or other Internet sources. This issue is intertwined with convincing library decision-makers that licensed databases continue to be essential for research and that free web sites are complementary to specialized, subscription-based databases.”

Just educating and convincing patrons and funders of the value of library resources are not enough, however. Many vendors realize they need to improve their releases by better integrating information products with other library tools, including the catalog or meta-search engines.

Future products should also be better integrated with the work patterns of users, or, as ProQuest CSA put it, developing “products that most effectively anticipate the information needs of the ultimate end user.” This means developing products that increase “the profile of library-sponsored resources in the minds and daily habits of researchers. The focus is bringing library resources closer to the context of their patrons’ environment. This is categorized as workflow application integration, whether through course

services that allow small businesses and entrepreneurs access to information...to develop business plans, research competitors, find suppliers, research developing markets, and identify...opportunities.”

Using social networking

Tapping into the power of social networking is another tactic to make information products more relevant. As the Emerald spokesperson wrote, “The way people learn is evolving—and becoming more ‘social’—which means that social technologies such as blogs, wikis, feeds, etc., will be used more by publishers in their research consumption and in the consumption of research. The challenge is to use these new learning technologies within the service provision to library users.”

Information vendors and librarians share a common challenge to educate users and funders, ensure budget strength, and meet user needs.

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